DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 044 CS 507 740

AUTHOR Klinger-Vartabedian, Laurel; Cregan, Lori
TITLE Small Town Tales: Endemic Performance in Rural America.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Communication Research; *Community Influence; *Folk Culture; *Local History; Rural Sociology; *Story Telling
IDENTIFIERS Communication Patterns; Kansas; *Oral Tradition; *Small Towns

ABSTRACT

Storytelling is a performance medium which is enhanced by the qualities indigenous to small towns: collective memory and common history. A type of narrative peculiar to small towns, the community-wide anecdote, is one example of storytelling. The transmittal of such tales is termed "endemic performance" because the retelling of the tales could only occur in a particular type of society. It is a medium which is not easily duplicated in a more complex and mobile urban setting. Two examples of community wide anecdotes from Kansas towns serve as case studies and provide evidence that the narratives do exist and have been perpetuated. One of the tales recounts the mass illness that followed a 1940 church supper; the other story immortalizes a 1961 bomb hoax. As the stories demonstrate, the form and function of the oral tradition is alive and well in small town tales. Further research should examine thematic elements in these stories. Such studies, if interdisciplinary in nature, can provide insights from literary, communication, and sociological perspectives. (Fifteen footnotes are included.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED342044

SMALL TOWN TALES : ENDEMIC PERFORMANCE IN RURAL AMERICA

Laurel Klinger-Vartabedian
Amarillo College

Lori Cregan
Kansas Newman College

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
L. Vartabedian

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Laurel Klinger-Vartabedian
Amarillo College Box 447
Amarillo, Texas 79178

CS507740

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

This essay examines storytelling within the framework of the collective memory and common history indigenous to small communities. A type of narrative peculiar to small towns--the community-wide anecdote--is identified. The transmittal of these tales is termed "endemic performance" because the retelling of these tales could only occur in a particular type of society. The constraints of: 1) the occurence of an event which becomes a community anecdote; 2) which is relived in spontaneous storytelling; and, 3) evolves through collective memory, result in a medium which is not easily duplicated in a more complex and mobile urban setting.

Two examples of community wide-anecdotes provide evidence that these narratives do exist and have been perpetuated. The form and function of the oral tradition is alive and well in small town tales.

SMALL TOWN TALES: ENDEMIC PERFORMANCE IN RURAL AMERICA

Storytelling is a performance medium which is enhanced by the qualities indigenous to small towns. While urban areas may be mourning the loss of the "verbal town square," the sharing of stories and events on a community-wide basis is still a pastime in rural America. Although the entertainment value of this activity is apparent, less obvious is the idea that this oral tradition is instrumental in creating both community and self identity.

It is a basic social need to share a common narrative with friends, co-workers and families. Small towns because of their size, and the interrelatedness of their inhabitants have antecdotes which belong to the community just as individuals have personal, familial or workrelated stories. Small town tales contribute to the maintenance of sense of place and belongingness for the people of rural communities. Discovery of these tales is a quest into a rich and varied cultural landscape which is often overlooked in an increasingly homogenous society. At a time when entertainment is largely a mass mediated phenomenon the re-telling of these stories is particularly crucial to insure their preservation.

The Purpose of Storytelling

Storytelling is both artistic and pragmatic in purpose. In poetic words, we tell stories:

> Because the story of our life/ becomes our life/
> Because each of us tells/the same story/but tells it differently/
> and none of us tells it/the same way twice/
> Because grandmothers looking like spiders/ want to enchant the children/
> and grandfathers need to convince us/
> what happened happened because of them...1

Storytelling is an ancient practice which is defined as being an art form with a definite structure yet a dynamic negotiation between the audience and the teller. 2

Storytelling is simple, yet sophisticated in intent; it is both entertaining and enlightening. "Storying is a vehicle for transcending time, for binding people together with the future, the past , and one another, for extending commonality of experience, for ordering events to make existence more sensible and meaningful." Addressing the transcendent properties of stories and tales, Bettleheim suggested: "If we hope to live not just from moment to moment but in true consciousness of our existence then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives."

Through our telling and re-telling of tales we amuse, philosophize, commune, explore social relationships and re-affirm our common experience with others. As Vansina noted, "Reminiscences are bits of life history...They are essential to a notion of personality and identity. They are the image of oneself one cares to transmit to others." The small town offers a forum in which it is still possible to have a dynamic negotiation between audience and narrator because a common history of events and people exists. In part, it can be argued that the loss of the ability to have collective experiences and share those experiences verbally marks the point at which diffusion of community, and ultimately diffusion of self, begin.

Societal Change and Collective Memory

Oscar Lewis cautioned against acceptance of the idyll of folk society saying that it is an idealized image that describes small-scale society as yeilding "values of serentity, grace, dignity, cooperation, friendliness, and piety long since denied to us who live in the cold, impersonal,urban conglomerations of modern society." However, the virtues of small scale society are evident when the focus is upon the oral tradition since oral tradition relies upon a community based "common history." In fact, some researchers have defined community as the perpetuation of a common history:

> "Communities, in the sense in which we are using the term, have a history--in an important sense they are constituted by their past--

and for this reason we can speak of a real community as a "community of memory," one that does not forget its past. In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative... The communities of memory that tie us to the past also turn us toward the future as communities of hope. They carry a context of meaning that can allow us to connect our aspirations for ourselves and those closest to us with the aspirations of a larger whole..."

There are many forums in which society offers a community of memory for its members. On a smaller scale families and relationships provide a community of memory. Religious communities reaffirm continuity through rituals, national community is defined by patriotic events, and ethnic, racial and corporate communities exist. In fact, in the widely acclaimed book In Search of Excellence the authors recognized the importance of the oral tradition to "excellent" companies: "We were struck by the dominant use of story, slogan and legend as people tried to explain the characteristics of their own great institutions...these stories, myths and legends appear to be very important because they convey the organization's shared values or culture." While common history may be preserved to some extent by various social institutions, it is by definition often a fatality of a larger, more mobile, urban society.

People who move from job to job or city to city in the corporate cultures described above are inheritors of a history-- not participants in the script. They are transients who must seek belongingness in a less tangible community than those for whom community means a place on the map that they call home. While elegiac in tone, this is not intended to be an indictment against the substance of urban society in general. Rather it is an attempt to emphasize that oral tradition, unlike the written word, requires a stable setting which is small enough to retain collective memory.

Small Communities and Storytelling

Garrison Keillor's rich tales of the citizens of Lake Wobegon revived interest in the values , virtues , foibles and humor of small town America. In regard to the appeal of Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon," Larson and Oravec stated: "Nostalgia may not be generated only by the loss of a common past but also by a present experience of loss...it is the shared culture of exiles, from wherever they come." 9 They suggest that for his audience, Keillor creates a fictional community his listeners can inhabit. Skow and White invoked an appropriate metaphor when they explained the appeal of the "Prairie Home Companion" by suggesting that "childhood is the small town everyone came from." Through his stories Keillor may be providing the return to a sanctuary where people's fates are intertwined. For those who are personally familiar with smaller communities he provides an extraordinary understanding of the experience of growing up and living in "a town time forgot." And perhaps equally crucial, it is possible that our present experience of loss is not only for the decline of a sense of community but also for the loss of the ancient oral tradition which has been so much a part of past generations. We miss hearing stories being told: Keillor's telling of the tales fills a void as well.

It is no accident that this great revival of the oral tradition fictionalized inhabitants of a small town. Because a common history of events and people exists, smaller communities have retained qualities fundamental to the form and content of oral tradition. Storytelling prospers in a small town where it is more possible to be simultaneously a listener and a participant. There is a capacity to have a collective memory of community wide events which occurred 10, 20, 30 or more years ago and to have a sense of involvement in those events. People have their own perspectives and add details to the story. Those who have not heard the story often know the people who are involved and so have the ability to enter into the recounting of the tale. The re-telling becomes an affirmation of the commonality of experience. In the small town people can

add to one another's discourse and alter the text as the story is told.

Authors' fictional tales are no doubt often inspired by actual happenings. Certainly, fact is often embellished and made richer by the insights or imagination of the author in the process of writing. Of interest to this paper are the non-fictional tales--the actual happenings-- which are both an integral yet "unnoticed" aspect of small town life. They can rival fabricated events in their depth and humor, are significant glimpses into the national character , and hold fascination because they are not fictional. Of particular interest is the idea of "community-wide anecdotes" or events extraordinary enough to become part of the collective memory of the townspeople. They define the culture which spawned them. They define the people who revel in the telling of them.

Storytelling, in this form, is undisputedly a type of performance, though not highly structured since the recounting of anecdotes occurs spontaneously. The term "endemic performance" is coined to underscore the idea that this impromptu artform is found among a particular people in a particular locale. Endemic performance is a product of the parameters of the setting in which it occurs-- a setting in which people and place are interconnected over time. Thus, an endemic performance relys upon having a salient event occur in the community which results in spontaneous storytelling. Finally, community members negotiate the elements of the plot and characterizations initially as stories surrounding the event are recounted and then for years subsequently through collective memory.

Methodology

A case study approach was used to develop the following examples of community-wide anecdotes. Size of community and determination that the stories were part of the oral history of the selected communities were two primary constraints. Accordingly, the following stories are from communities in rural Kansas with populations of under 2000. In order to assure that these tales endured they had to have taken place over 10

years ago. These tales were re-constructed through personal interviews, and personal correspondence with community members who were involved in the events. Both persons who were involved directly and persons who re-told the events as they remembered "hearing" them were contacted. As evidenced in the narratives, not all versions were identical since storytelling is subject to personal interpretations. Details were then written in a narrative form with attention to capturing both the content and the intent of the storytellers. Specifically, this paper chronicles anecdotes from two small towns in Kansas. The first narrative " The Pukefest" details a 1940's all-church supper which resulted in community-wide food poisoning and the second story "When the Russians Came to Kansas" describes a 1961 prank which got out of control.

The Pukefest

The Smoky Hill River valley has always prided itself on successfully blurring denominational boundaries, especially when it comes to social events. In Chapman, even the ecumenical-style Good Friday service, though held at St. Micheal's, features the Lutheran and Methodist ministers. If an observer counts twice as many Catholics as Protestants under church nave, it is probably because immigrants from Limerick and Tipperary first flocked to the Irish-looking green fields of this part of north central Kansas.

In the fall of 1940, this cooperative spirit between congregations manifested itself in an all-churches supper. In the time efficient way of farm and village women, they decided to stew the chickens on the preceding day and let the meat cool in a cellar overnight. The parish hall on the next evening was crowded with hungry townsfolk and farmers, eager for talk and food, and in the serving lines, smiling churchwomen proudly ladled steaming bowlfuls of poultry and pasta to their neighbors.

No one could later remember who first felt the misery--interrupting his or her conversation to dash red-faced to the bathroom--though some hoped it was the banker,

for if any of the assemblage could be said to deserve this fate it was surely and only he. Stomachs churned and bowels convulsed and the church-going populace of eastern Dickinson County was felled (for the evening) by acute diarrhea and vomiting. Grown men stooped like their grandfathers in the alley, since the restrooms were unable to handle all the food-poisoned sufferers. An uninterrupted trail of vomit extended from church door to downtown, some three blocks away. Attempting to flee in cars was impossible; everyone was desperately seeking a bit of privacy in which to be violently ill. Families formed circles to pool their pain.

Some minutes earlier, old Doctor Meyer, fresh from helping a fearful heifer with a difficult birth, came into the parish hall and became one of the last to be served. He set down his fork after seeing townspeople scurrying out, hands clamped over mouths, and wisely stepped out behind the building to force himself to vomit; thus, becoming the only chicken-eater to avoid food poisoning. His name is still a by-word for wisdom.

Father Richard Dailey, gruff Irishman, lost a bit of saintly credibility with the children of St. Michael's since he too succumbed to the tainted chicken. Later he remarked that if the Good Lord had seen fit to flood the town with the Smoky Hill River that night, not a Chapmanite could have been mustered to help.

Some likened what was soon called "the pukefest" to the influenza epidemic of '18 or the "bloody flux" of the Civil War, though both were terrible exaggerations. No one died, though a few wished they might. The loss of dignity among the faithful church-goers was perhaps the worst casualty.

After digestive systems returned to normal, the need to find the perpetrator consumed the community. Who first volunteered her warm cellar for overnight storage of the stewed chicken? Whose idea was it to stew the chicken a day early and pack it into crocks? And how come it had to be so warm-- food-turningly warm-- in October anyway?

When the Russians Came to Kansas

Even in Western Kansas school children worried about whether the family bomb shelter would be built, knowing we were poised on the edge of sudden and swift destruction. And at night you would hear that occasional hum overhead and listen, and wonder -- could it be a Russian plane... come to bomb one of the most sparsely inhabited counties in the whole U S of A? But then you didn't know the county was sparsely populated because you had enough people for a baseball team. You had a far more accurate perspective on global issues, thanks to the relentless Weekly Reader.

The year 1961 was not a good year to be thinking too much about bigger issues. But there are always those who dream of bigger issues and who seem to see the potential in ,apping people's most deep seated fears...in a good natured way, of course. This then, was how things were when two local fellows, recently returned to their hometown to start adult life, flew into the empty night sky and dropped the big one.

Small town newspapers are staffed by the venerable editor-owner, the printer-typesetter, who can fix anything that moves, and the social columnist who faithfully collects and reports comings and goings (in this case in a column entitled Round About). Somehow the social columnist always ends up bearing the burden. So, when a round black object with the letters USSR was found in a field adjacent to her farmstead (with no trace of footprints indicating comings or goings) the Cold War had arrived.

Locals recall that the Sheriff was called first; calling the FBI, or was it the CIA, or maybe just the U.S. AirForce was an afterthought. When special agents arrived in the small town of Ashland they requested that the Airforce send a bomb squad. Meanwhile, night was falling on the plains. Word had travelled of the Russian intrusion so two guards were posted, presumably for reasons of national security. No one had noticed how considerate it was of the Russians to print USSR in English.

Sometimes jokes get a little out of hand. Certainly no joke is of any value to the

creator if no one knows who thought it up. Naturally, everyone knew. Which was really fine at first, but now it was obvious that something had to be done. So, the two young men...the very worried two young men, drove without headlights and arrived five miles from town at the scene of the crime. One slithered across the field, took possession of the "bomb" slithered back across the field, into the awaiting getaway car and they went back to town. Another version has it that one drove and the other ran in his stocking feet along the railroad track toward the safety of home.

They must have felt things were looking up for them. The outside investigators however didn't see it that way since this created another problem. It looked very bad for the special agents who were guarding national security when morning came and the bomb was gone. Of course as one local historian pointed out, the perpetrators had the distinct advantage of knowing that the bomb was an iron pig used to clean pipelines, while the guards no doubt had no desire to be blown to eternity in a plowed field in Western Kansas.

That morning the young men decided the wisest course might be to go to the Sheriff and throw themselves on the mercy of the court. They received a severe tongue lashing about the severity of a "bomb hoax." Perhaps times were simpler since no charges were filed. And, perhaps the Sheriff was particularly persuasive with the authorities because he knew that in a small town a spectacular practicle joke is revered like an exceptional piece of art.

Storytelling , Storymaking and Universal Themes

Storytelling is a premier form of amusement in small town America . Since idle gossip is also an undeniable outcome of closely knit societies, a clear differentiation must be made: these stories transcend idle gossip. They are situationally and culturally based , with underlying themes universal enough to give them staying power. The underlying themes of events which become big news in a small town reflect the values

and character of its inhabitants. Just as any good story should, these tales remain because they have universal truths about human nature. The bomb story is about inventiveness, tapping fears and then creating one's own fear as a result, and finally, it is about the little guys outfoxing the big guys. The pukefest takes the sacred institiution of the potluck supper and turns it into a question of religious fallibility, blame placing, and the triumph of the common sense hero (the veterinarian).

It should be noted that storytelling is above all, homespun entertainment. There is not only the art of reliving the outcome of unplanned events such as occurred with the church supper but there is the art of "creating events" to build stories around as was initially the case with the bomb hoax. There is a capacity to amuse with the primitive tool of conversation: with and about others. While Postman laments that the mediated "news of the day" has nothing to do with our lives , this phenomenon isn't quite as pervasive in smaller communities where the news of the day is delivered in conversation with one's neighbor. The value of a good story--told well--is acknowledged. The value of a well-orchestrated event worth talking about is appreciated. And if the news of the day is truly outstanding it becomes a part of the repetoire of endemic performances of tomorrow, of next year, and finally of subsequent decades. As the fictional character Will Tweedy rationalizes after ruining his Aunt's Christmas pageant by substituting 19 live rats for the requested one live mouse: "Oh, well, heck, if it weren't for my rats, Cold Sassy wouldn't remember that dern play past New Year's. As it was, everybody in town would be talking about it for years to come."

Conclusions and Future Directions

Many small towns are a rich and largely untapped natural resource of non-fictional stories. Of particular interest are those events in small towns which are unique enough to be the "talk of the town" and which become part of the collective memory of those communities. The capacity to entertain and define ourselves with home grown tales is an

intrinsic part of being human. As oral tradition gives way to written or mediated communication our knowledge of ourselves and of our world is necessarily altered.

Keillor stated, "People who think that towns such as Lake Wobegon no longer exist lead lives of such isolation that I can only pity them." These communities definitely do exist and they embody a tradition which is worth attending to and worth preserving. An awareness of the value of these stories to the culture at large should be noted, lest we become in the words of Edgar Lee Masters, " a land of aridity without stories and myths." Storytelling is so fundamental to small towns that the creative forces surrounding this pasttime go unnoticed. A rediscovery of the oral tradition should be undertaken which involves the people of rural communities in a re-telling of their tales.

The intent of this article has been to show that community -wide anecdotes and endemic performance are important consequences of small town demographics. The logical progression would be research which further chronicles community-wide anecdotes and analyzes them in terms of key thematic elements. Research which further examines the themes of community-wide anecdotes would help explicate the social and personal norms which form the foundation of these small communities. Finally, new awareness of the ways in which oral tradition reinforces a sense of self and community make this an interdisciplinary task which could provide rich insights from literary, communication and sociological perspectives.

FOOTNOTES

1 Mueller, Lisel , "Why We Tell Stories", The Need to Hold Still , Louisiana State University Press, 1979.

2 Norma Livo and Sandra Rietz , Storytelling: Process and practice (Littleton, Colorado :Libraries Unlimited, 1986) 7-14.

3 Norma Livo and Sandra Rietz , Storytelling: Process and practice (Littleton, Colorado :Libraries Unlimited, 1986) 5.

4 Bruno Bettelheim, On the Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales (New York: Knopf, 1976) 3.

5 Jan Vansina, Oral Tradition as History (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 8.

6 Oscar Lewis, The Idyll of Folk Society: Tepoztlan Restudied. In Readings on Modern Sociology pp. 51-64. (Ed.) Alex Inkeles, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J : Prentice-Hall, 1966) 51.

7 Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton. Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley:University of California Press, 1985)153.

8 Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 75.

9 Charles Larson and Cristine Oravec, "A Prairie Home Companion and the Fabrication of Community, " Critical Studies in Mass Communication 4 (1987): 221-245.

10 John Skow and Jack White, "Lonesome whistle blowing," Time, 4 November 1985: 68-73.

11 Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death, (New York: Penguin, 1985) 7-8.

12 Olive Ann Burns, Cold Sassy Tree, (New York: Dell Publishing Co. ,1984 (320).

13 Walter Ong, Orality and Literacy, (London: Methuen, 1982).

14 M. Schumacher, "Sharing the laughter with Garrison Keillor". Writer's Digest, (January: 1986) 32.

15 Edgar Masters, Spoon River Anthology (New York : MacMillan, 1916) 49.